



## TMINM – THE SAGA OF IDAHO, HOSPITAL SHIP OF THE ASIATIC SQUADRON

Long before the appearance of the first white-hulled hospital ships, the Navy employed an assortment of vessels to meet the need of hospitalization at sea. Among the lesser known, and perhaps most unique, was a sailing ship commissioned in the age of steam called USS *Idaho*.

Extending 298 feet in length with a beam of 44 feet, *Idaho* was completed in 1866 during the beginning of the Navy's post-Civil War decline. Admittedly, her start was less than auspicious. Though originally constructed as a steam-powered sloop, during her sea trials she was found to be much slower than her contracted speed of 15 knots (barely reaching 9 knots). The Navy was first inclined to reject the ship until her builder offered to "make good" and convert her into a full-rigged ship (three masts). Her engines and boilers were removed and she was transformed from an under-performing steamer to one of the fastest sailing ships in the fleet capable of speeds of 15 knots (the fastest clipper ships of the day typically averaged about 16 knots).



Senior physician Albert Gihon

Though originally conceived as a warship, the Navy now employed her as a combination hospital-supply ship. *Idaho* was fitted as a 50-bed hospital by the Naval Hospital and Laboratory in Brooklyn, N.Y., and was assigned a medical complement consisting of a senior physician (Surgeon Albert Gihon), a junior physician (Assistant Surgeon Jerome Kidder) and an apothecary (Charles Fisher).

She left New York in November 1867 and set sail for the Far East via Rio de Janeiro. Her senior physician marveled over her speed and beauty, writing: "Even one who has stood upon her decks and witnessed how steadily she sided over the sea, cutting the billows noiselessly, leaving no wake of troubled foam, not even bending the breeze."



On May 18, 1868, *Idaho* arrived in Nagasaki, Japan where she began a tour as an auxiliary ship for the newly formed Asiatic Squadron. In the decades following the Civil War, as the Navy extended its global sphere of influence to protect American interests, hospital-supply ships like *Idaho* began playing increasingly important roles in the squadrons where they offered capabilities not existing aboard other ships.

Although Nagasaki was initially deemed the proposed homeport for the *Idaho*, she was soon relocated to the more bustling and international Yokohama which boasted British, French and Dutch hospitals and was a short distance away from Edo (Tokyo) the political center of Japan.

For sailors stationed with the squadron first impressions of *Idaho* were wholly positive. A letter dated July 1868 that appeared in the *Army and Navy Journal* stated: “The *Idaho* is moored off the foreign settlement; she presents a fine appearance and fulfills Ned Buntline’s[i] beau ideal of a craft, being long, low, and rakish looking. . .her sails have been unbent, and the light spars sent down from aloft all of which denotes a long stay in this port.”

*Idaho* received patients suffering from the usual assortment of febrile and digestive ailments common in the service. But Assistant Surgeon Kidder also noted that venereal diseases—primarily syphilis—was among the greatest challenges for the ship’s medical complement. Between November 1867 and August 1869, 38 percent admissions were venereal cases. The problem was so severe that Admiral Rowan, Commander of the Asiatic Squadron, decreed that any sailor sent to *Idaho* for treatment of secondary syphilis would be reduced in rate until returned to duty or medically discharged from service.

Assistant Surgeon Kidder reported that the hospital ship treated these patients through rest, diet, hygienic measures, and constant observation. Patients were also administered the typical treatments of the day

including nitrate of silver, carbonate of zinc, potassium tartrate, and also “Blackwash,” a lotion made of lime water and calomel (mercuric chloride).

In August 1869, *Idaho* was ordered to travel to San Francisco via Hong Kong and Panama to return sailors whose terms had expired, those medical discharged as well prisoners serving out sentences of general court martial. But her journey home would not be fully realized.

On September 21, 1869, the *Idaho* found herself in the center of a raging typhoon. During the height of the tempest, as one officer later recalled, “the darkness was impenetrable, excepting when there were occasional flashes of sheet-lightning when the waves could be banked up, one over the other, seething and boiling high above and around the ship. The noise of the wind was like unearthly yells and the ship quivered in every timber.”

Despite being de-masted and her hull greatly battered by violent waves and torrential rains, *Idaho* remained afloat and remarkably no one aboard was killed or lost overboard. The crew jury-rigged her and she sailed back into Yokohama never to leave the port under the U.S. flag.

“There was something almost funereal about her return, for she was eight days crawling back over the distance she had so gayly sped in one, before she re-entered the harbor and reached anchorage which she will probably never again leave,” Surgeon Gihon recalled. “There she lies, condemned by the board of survey as unseaworthy, an interesting relic of our naval history, and a noble monument of that immortal genius which enabled man to cope successfully with the elements in one of their grandest contests.”

Though now unseaworthy, the Navy continued to use *Idaho* for its stores, to house prisoners and for hospitalization. From 1869 until 1872, she operated as the Navy’s station hospital in Japan until the U.S. Naval Hospital Yokohama was constructed.

USS *Idaho* was decommissioned on December 31, 1873 and sold to the East Indies Trading Company.

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[i] Ned Buntline (AKA, Edward Judson) was a former Navy sailor-turned journalist, and pulp novelist.